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## Realist Melodrama and the African-American Family: Billy Woodberry's **Bless Their Little Hearts**

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In the aftermath the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992, Billy Woodberry's film, **Bless Their Little Hearts**, of a decade earlier stands as one of the most compelling recent works presenting the dynamics of African-American consciousness. This study of a family facing the economic, social, and personal realities of unemployment in the Los Angeles Black community shows the private sphere, the domestic side of the public events which erupted in an explosive contest with state power and authority and an assault on commercial property following the acquittal of police who beat Rodney King.

I want to use this film as a reference point for discussing realist melodrama, a film and theatrical form which has been frequently attacked, dismissed, and ignored in recent years. Considered hopelessly bound to the "monstrous delusion" of realism, to use Peter Wollen's phrase,<sup>1</sup> by proponents of a Brechtian aesthetic, hopelessly old fashioned by adherents of avant garde narrative, and forgotten by postmodernists, realist melodrama remains however one of the perennially popular forms used by artists seeking to depict the unrepresented and misrepresented. Why is this so? The all-too-easy answer is that such dramatists, film and videomakers naively believe in the power of realism and uncritically accept the narrative logic of melodrama. But I find that answer itself naive. It ignores certain demonstrable powers and appeals of the form.

But first a few clarifications. **Bless Their Little Hearts** is a black and white feature film made from a script by Charles Burnett, who is also the film's cinematographer. Burnett is the writer

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<sup>1</sup>Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, third ed., Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1972, 166.

and director of the independent narratives **Killer of Sheep**, and **My Brother's Wedding**, and the Hollywood feature, **To Sleep With Anger**. **Bless Their Little Hearts** appeared in 1983 at the end of a first wave of new independent filmmaking in Los Angeles by African-Americans, a movement characterized by critic Clyde Taylor as the "L.A. Rebellion."<sup>2</sup> This aesthetic rebellion against the conventional presentation of African-Americans by Hollywood was influenced by UCLA professor Teshome Gabriel who lectured on, presented and wrote about Third Cinema in the Third World (in his book of that title), and it produced important films by Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, and Larry Clark. Woodberry is also a UCLA graduate and **Bless Their Little Hearts** was his master's degree project. I find the film one of the most accomplished of this group of fascinating and important works.

In summary, the story covers several months in the life of a family, centering on the father, Charlie. Recently unemployed, he finds day labor but no steady job. His wife, Andais, exhausted from her own job, domestic chores, and coping with the reduced income, avoids his sexual advances. Charlie takes up with another women, but when she demands more time, money, and responsibility from him, the affair ends. He returns home to what becomes the film's most highly charged scene: a ten minute quarrel done in a small kitchen with a handheld continuous wide angle shot. Charlie later goes fishing and realizes that he could sell the fish, and with his buddies does so, hawking on the roadside, but at the film's end he walks away, providing his answer to the moment of moral decision that he described early in the film: at a certain point in life one has to choose between the material and the spiritual.

Second, I want to narrow the broad term "melodrama" for this discussion. I see melodrama as a protean form, occupying many different spaces at different times. Without denying recent remainders of the action/adventure/sensation tradition of the form, I am particularly concerned here with the domestic melodrama tradition of the bourgeois era which has a fairly coherent historical and social existence. In this context, melodrama finds a long and varied expression in playing attention to and validating the significance of personal, familial, and workgroup social relations. Descended from the French *drame* of the 18th century, beginning with Diderot's *Le Père*, the domestic melodrama, while robbed of the awesome destiny of classical and neoclassical tragedy, finds its viewer's fascination in the changing dynamics of human relationships on the everyday scale and with (relatively) ordinary people. As I've argued in an earlier essay, it operates on the unresolved and unresolvable tension between a capitalist society on the one hand and personal and familial needs and aspirations on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Third, I want to clarify my understanding of the term "realism." Realism has a bad name today for some good reasons and a few bad ones. Certainly the current critical catechism with its repeated formula that everything is constructed within discourse, culture, and ideology seems to dismiss the animating base of a realist aesthetic and epistemology. And I hardly want to go back to a traditional left politics or aesthetics to justify realism. But the poststructural/postmodernist spin on realism itself contains a certain naïveté and problem which is that it cannot explain the undeniable power of realism except as a "monstrous delusion" perpetrated by an insidious

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<sup>2</sup>Taylor

<sup>3</sup>"Notes on Melodrama and the Family under Capitalism," *Film Reader* 3, 1978.

culture industry, or in a more whimsical version, as a familiar pleasure, a set of codes producing a happy consciousness.

From such positions it is impossible to see that highly conscious, theoretically knowledgeable, politically critical artists might actually choose realism as an aesthetic strategy (one of many) in order to achieve certain results that cannot be attained by other strategies which themselves have their own limitations. I am thinking here of choices such as the Brecht-Godardian countercinema, the avant garde New Narrative, the punk and post-punk transgression, the postmodern parody and pastiche, the slickly commercial, and so forth. That each of these strategies has potentials and liabilities, that each of them should be or could be part of the repertoire of the culturally current master artist is a postmodern insight that not all have yet attained.

*Bless Their Little Hearts* uses various conventional codes of realism in the general style of Italian Neo-Realism: black and white cinematography, frequent and noticable use of hand held camera in location shooting, actual locations, lighting which approximates the location's given illumination, depiction of ordinary characters in ordinary settings, speech marked by dialect, some unprofessional actors, "unpleasant" topics, and working class as opposed to middle class life. It also makes a number of distinct changes (and we could use these changes to claim that the film goes beyond the "referential illusion" to use Barthes' phrase, for the discourse of realism.<sup>4</sup> We find frequent use of low camera positions, often approximating that of a child's view, especially in the interiors as well as static shots held for a significant amount of time after the key action has taken place, resulting in an emphasis on duration and space within the shot. (In interviews cinematographer Burnett has expressed his interest in Ozu.) Such techniques complement and extend the realism, but in a way which veers away from conventional shot and editing rhythms. In addition, the film has certain markers of independent very low budget dramatic filmmaking: some shots are included which are technically flawed, probably in the lab processing, and some of the voicetrack audio is so low that lines are lost. In addition since no credits are given for the music, one suspects that existing recorded music was used but that rights were not cleared, another typical characteristic of independent low budget work.<sup>5</sup> To some extent these markers also help situate the film within the realist mode since they are also familiar to viewers of similar realistic coded works.

All of this fits the close observation of everyday detail in visuals, speech, and character actions that remains central to a realist aesthetic. At the same time, it is important to distinguish the use of realism from that version of realism that pushes to a naturalist position. Using many of the same techniques, naturalism proceeds in a steadily, inexorably downward narrative movement, one of stasis and inevitability at the end. Naturalism has been so often maligned by the political right and left and by commercial and avant garde sectors that we may actually forget its political

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<sup>4</sup>Roland Barthes,

<sup>5</sup>Without copyright permissions such films can still be easily shown in media art centers, festivals, and classroom screenings. However for tv broadcast or commercial distribution, fees must be paid and music cleared. The most predominant music track is a saxophone [fact check] and piano; the sax is played in the style of Sonny Criss, the late L.A. based musician.

basis and its current variant manifestations. Of its politics Bertolt Brecht pointed out that naturalism has a progressive aspect in that it shows that something is profoundly wrong with society, although it cannot provide any insight or perspective on how those problems might change or be changed.<sup>6</sup> Because it effectively evacuates human agency or portrays collective action as finally futile, naturalism comes to a static endgame. In terms of its current versions, I can mention Chantal Akerman's film, **Jeanne Dielmann, 23 rue de commerce**, as a perfect modernist example of naturalist melodrama with a *coup de théâtre* ending.

At moments **Bless Their Little Hearts** could be taken as naturalist, but the overall narrative trajectory places the most negative moment of crisis--the quarrel precipitated by Charlie's infidelity--about two-thirds of the way through the story. The fight is based in the double bind of the wife's repeated statement that she is tired of the current situation brought on by unemployment and underemployment and the husband's claim that he cannot make "the Man" give him a job. Clearly the external situation is the determinant one in the last instance, a point made lyrically in a sequence of Charlie after a day's labor. As he rides home in a pickup truck, industrial buildings move past him. One privileged shot shows a half-demolished factory, itself the symbol of an industrial economy in decay, and the emphatic point of the visual sequence which shows his exclusion from the relatively well paying factory work.<sup>7</sup> On the soundtrack we hear a woman singing a blues song: "Lost in a dream/and I just can't find my way."

But the film doesn't present a consistent downward movement. Some individual episodes reverse the expectation. For example, when Charlie shaves one morning, he looks in the mirror in a conventional narrative symbolization of self-examination, self-searching. He then completes the cleaning ritual by turning the water faucets off. The degree of his frustration is expressed in the force of the closing. His older daughter then enters to wash, and finding the faucets impossible to open, gets a huge wrench and taps on the handles to open them. The moment is comic and telling, for here and elsewhere the children function as those who must fit "in between" the parents' frustrations and stresses. Here they do so successfully, though at many other points it is clear that they end up mimicking the parents' behavior and often the most destructive parts of it.

By placing the deepest moment of crisis two-thirds into the film, the subsequent episodes serve to redeem the pessimism. Fishing is shown as a lyrical moment of self-directed accomplishment. And in a key moment, after his daughter has suffered a broken arm (the specific event is not clear, but Charlie's speech at that point makes it clear that he attributes the cause to their neighborhood), Charlie apologizes that he cannot make enough money to have the family live in a better place and breaks down crying. This display of the injury to his pride and exhibition of his frustration provides a cathartic moment which re-establishes the family bonding with children and wife (who comforts him).

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<sup>6</sup>Brecht

<sup>7</sup>For a concise discussion of the Los Angeles economy and its impact on the African-American community, Mike Davis, "The L.A. Inferno," *Socialist Review*. 22:1 (Jan-Mar 1992), 57-80. Davis' booklength study, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (NY: Random House, Vintage, 1992) provides the full context. Also of interest, Edward Soja's two chapters on L.A. in his *Postmodern Geography*.

The momentum of realism in **Bless Their little Hearts** is tempered by the dynamics of melodrama. The protagonist's moral decision is frankly indicated at the very beginning when Charlie tells his buddies, who casually talk about robbery as a potential source of income, that one must choose between the spiritual and the material. The open expression of emotion and the narrative's repeated presentation of the masculine crisis re-contexted through the effects on the wife and children allows for a greater understanding of family dynamics. The family drama is clear in **Bless Their Little Hearts**, but is also presented as a dilemma. At the end, he sees his buddies antics in trying to stop autos as playing the fool. Charlie's choice to reject the pursuit of materialism which turns man into fool is clearly doing the right thing, but what decisions the rest of the family makes are not examined with the same attention. Because Kaycee Moor who plays Andais, the wife, is the actor with the most screen presence in the film, her character is strong and convincing, but her psychology is barely sketched in. The moral choice is privileged with the husband.

These too are the marks of melodrama: a drama of clear moral choices, appeals to morality and sentiment, the potential pathos of seeing the effects of bad actions on innocent children and defenseless women, a clearly marked villain (the Man), a reconciliation and endorsement of the family, episodic construction, emphasis on emotional moments over narrative explanation, and so forth. Why then, to return to my earlier question, would some artist choose to use this dramatic form when it seems so quickly dated and artificial and even dishonest when we look at examples from the past? I think the answer is first that melodrama is usually so strongly time-bound to its own moment of production because it uses the social commonplaces of its current time as an unthinking referential and moral norm in a way that is both its power and its liability. And second, in extension, it is useful for the dramatic artist precisely because it articulates those social commonplaces so well, so "naturally" in its construction that it gains a profound psychological resonance in the audience of its own time, especially when reinforced by depictions of the audience's own class, gender, and ethnicity. It works on the power of recognition and in two ways: in its realist dimension it provides recognition of the familiar, the everyday, the otherwise taken-for-granted, and in its emotional dimension it validates the frequently experienced as well as what is emotionally desirable, but sometimes unattainable. It is gratifying to see that Charlie will do the right thing and leave his buddies' materialism behind. It is gratifying to see that a husband's sexual wandering will be set right. It is gratifying to see that a man can cry in front of his family to cathect his humiliation.

This realist melodrama form avoids irony and self-reflection. It cannot claim the sophistication of playing stylization against content to achieve the ironic distancing claimed for Sirk, for example. But in its plain frankness, in its direct validation of the everyday and everyday desires, it speaks powerfully and directly of that which is unrepresented, misrepresented, and underrepresented in the dominant culture's depiction of the exploited. To say that Charlie must make a moral decision, one that may go against his immediate desires to bring money home for the family, is to speak from an authorial position within the work that speaks across to Charlie as an equal, not down to him as a victim. We are not so very far here from the judgment we are asked to pass on Mother Courage.

My understanding of the film differs significantly from a recent article by Edward Guerrero, "Negotiations of Ideology, Manhood and Family in Bill Woodberry's **Bless Their Little Hearts**."<sup>8</sup> While we agree on the film's value and achievement, Guerrero reads the film as a pessimistic naturalist story focussing on the character Charlie: "...Woodberry's film relentlessly unfolds to explore a spectrum of shrinking possibilities, foreclosed options and futile actions, occurring between the poles of the ideal and the material, that be film's end prove Charlie wrong." ( ) Drawing on an analysis of the film as very close in style and spirit to the Italian neo-realist classic, **The Bicycle Thief**, as centrally presenting the dilemma of the working class and poor African-American male, and, drawing on Fredric Jameson's marxist discussion of the "political unconscious" in works of narrative art, Guerrero draws a strong conclusion.

Of course we've seen these black men warehoused on all the corners and vacant lots of America's inner cities and ghettos. That's the familiar. The art of Woodberry's film resides in the fact that by the time of its conclusion, we can no longer deny that we understand how these discarded, black men have come to be at such a hellish, desolate location. For the entire narrative is a crafted irruption of the socially and politically repressed leading out thoughts and emotions in this direction until, finally, we have been forced to "see things differently." ( )

I agree with Guerrero that the film does this, but I think it also does more, and by looking at the family, at the wife and children, we can see the film as even richer in its presentation.

Realist melodrama has a recurrent appeal to artists seeking to construct dramatic narratives about and for the oppressed. It's been frequently noted that Italian Neo-Realism can be easily seen as the dominant style influencing the New Latin American Cinema. And specific examples, such as **Portrait of Teresa** (Cuba, d. Pastor Vega), confirm the persistence of the melodramatic form. While it would be foolish to ignore the artistic and political limits of realist melodrama, it would be equally foolish to ignore the potentials. For communities for whom the family in various forms is a basic unit of survival, and yet also a focal point of distress caused by outside forces, realist melodrama provides an often acute political discourse. Caught in a contradiction that doesn't go away, oscillating between the family as "haven in a heartless world," and families as "worlds of pain,"<sup>9</sup> realist melodrama can speak profoundly about and to people struggling against capitalism's destruction of human values.

Thanks to Billy Woodberry, Charles Burnett, Julia Lesage, John Hess, Angela Martin, JoAnn Elam, Joe Hendrix.

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<sup>8</sup>Black American Literature Forum (get ref.)

<sup>9</sup>Christopher Lasch , Lillian Rubin book titles

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The film is available (on videotape) from Billy Woodberry, 1607 S. Shenandoah, Los Angeles  
CA 90035; phone 213-205-0929